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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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UNDER the SAND- SEAS

Six hundred miles of devouring red desert lay between them and the nearest city—and the bust of a long-dead Martian smiled with the knowledge that could get them there!

By OLIVER E. SAARI

CHAPTER ONE

You Can't Swim in Sand!

FRED WELLS sighed. A pair of firm hands were passing over his body, swiftly and efficiently. They slid along his limbs, fondled his collar

bone, and passed on into the regions of his lower ribs.

"That's far enough," he muttered, trying to get up on elbow, opening his eyes.

He saw a face—a face that was made of furrowed leather and white bristle—a face that was as dry as the desert itself, and as old. The eyes squinted down at him in quiet approval.

"You've got luck, son," said the face. "You can thank old Mars' gravity for that. Not a bone broken."

"That's a lie," Fred grinned. "If my skull isn't cracked yet it's going to burst!"

Gingerly he smoothed his black hair over the sizable lump in the back of his head. The hair stuck to his fingers, pasted with warm blood. The metal floor was hard under him, slanting sharply down like the deck of a sinking ship.

That was it—a sinking ship! Fred lifted his throbbing head and was helped to a sitting position by a pair of strong, coarse hands.

The wrecked cabin was clearing in his vision. There was the radio unit, a shattered mass of glass and wire beside an instrument panel that was creased in the center like a piece of cardboard. A shatter-proof port was reamed with a thousand cracks, and a ragged rim of shorn rivets and torn insulation bordered a hole through which red sand was seeping.

Fred watched that sand and forgot the ache in his head. Like a dry liquid the brick-red stuff poured in through the crack in the hull, spreading out in a widening puddle on the floor. Fred suddenly knew what it meant.

"We're washed up," he breathed. "Down in the middle of Schonning Sea!"

"Easy, son, we're still floatin'," drawled the man with the grizzled face.

He was a study in calmness, standing there on the slanting deck like an immovable rock. His sand-beaten face and stocky, powerful figure told of hard strength. Back at Marsol they called Jeff

half Martian and half devil. A Martian desert rat.

Fred, however, couldn't share the other's calmness. He eyed the brick-red sand that was pouring into the plane's cabin. It bubbled up like a thick syrup but it was—dry.

"We're still floating," Fred repeated, "but for how long?"

He'd been at the plane's controls, should have kept her nose up. All he knew was that something had yanked it down. He could remember the nauseous whirling of the plane . . . the uprushing table of sand . . . and then darkness. They'd cracked up in the great Sand Ocean of Mars—the vast desert that covered nearly half the planet's surface.

Sand.

Sand that was like no other sand known to man. It was light and slippery and it flowed like water. A man could sink in it of his own weight and never leave a trace. Men had sunk into it—and planes.

"It was my fault," Fred said bitterly. "I shouldn't have flown her so low. Not used to this Martian air—maybe a gust of wind blew us—"

"It was no current of air we hit," said a voice from the back of the cabin.

Fred turned. For a moment he had forgotten there was a third.

He was sitting in one of the leather-cushioned seats, a tall thin man with an unruly mop of dirty gray hair; with gold rimmed spectacles perched on his nose. His appearance had changed somehow. It was the spectacles: there was no glass in them. The professor's near-sighted eyes squinted through empty rims.

"What do you mean, no air current?" Fred demanded.

"This. Watch."

With a dramatic flourish the Professor removed the empty rims from his nose. He swung them toward a steel brace, left them sticking there.

"Not magic—magnetism!" he an-

nounced. "We are perched on top of a powerful magnet. Probably a vast deposit of lodestone—magnetic oxide of iron—somewhere under the sand."

"You mean to say we were yanked out of the sky by a—a magnet? A natural magnet?" Fred marveled. "That's why the controls—"

HE PAUSED when he sensed something climbing on his foot, lapping softly at his shoe. The sand! It was spreading on the floor, creeping up. The plane was going down, nose down—like a plane in the middle of the Atlantic would have gone. But here the end was slower and surer. You couldn't swim in sand! Fifty million miles from Earth, six hundred miles from Marsol—and they'd go clear to the bottom, if there was a bottom.

Fred looked for Jeff. He'd lived his life on the rim of this desert; he'd know what to do. Through the whirling dust particles his foot had set up Fred could see Jeff's powerful form, suddenly moving.

"Give a hand," came Jeff's voice. "We gotta break out the sled before the door's covered up."

The sled! It was in the back of the plane, an electric-powered toboggan that could travel on the sand like a surf-board, staying afloat by momentum alone.

Madly Fred clambered up the sloping floor, pulled hastily at knots which held the sled while Jeff slashed at leather thongs with a knife. Finally the sled was free of its trappings, sliding down the slope of the floor, raising a cloud of dust at the nose of the ship. The sand there was two feet deep now. The big sled, with its sand-wheel propeller, electric motor, and batteries was a bulky thing, heavy even in Mars-gravity. Fred pulled at it, wedging his foot against a brace, while Jeff fought against internal air pressure to jerk open the door.

"Wait," said the Professor, putting out a restraining hand.

Fred wheeled on him.

"You fool!" he yelled. "Can't you see we're sinking in this damned sand? Come on—help!"

"We are not sinking. Look."

Fred gouged some of the stinging dust from his eyes and looked. The Professor was pointing toward the nose of the ship. The red sand rippled gently over the pilot's seat, lapped at the instrument board. Three feet deep. But was it rising? It half-covered a fuel dial, but did not climb over it.

Jeff, too, was staring at the sand, his body bent in frozen action. He was puzzled, looking to the Professor for verification of his senses. The sand ocean was bottomless; yet the plane sank no further. Why?

"We've hit bottom," said the Professor logically. "Bottom, four feet down."

Fred sank limply in one of the chairs. A crack in the skull, death, and a miracle all in a row were too much. He had to take a breath.

But breathing was hard. Even after the dust had settled with strange swiftness, Fred found his lungs laboring, sucking at a vanishing atmosphere. A numbing chill had entered the cabin. It was the open door, of course: their precious oxygen was going out into the semi-vacuum of the Martian desert. It had been seeping out all along through the crack in the hull, but not as fast.

Out there was only an endless expanse of dry quicksand, a tiny, heatless sun, and a cold blue-black sky. Air at atmosphere pressure—and just as cold.

CHAPTER TWO

The 'Weeds

“WHAT do you suppose we've hit?” asked Jeff of the Professor, slamming the door in the face of the Martian landscape.

"The magnetic mountain, probably. The ship seems to be propped up on her nose and landing gear on something pretty solid under the sand."

"Probably just the thing you were looking for," grunted Jeff. "Maybe it reached up and slapped us in the face."

Fred saw the Professor stiffen up, the mild eyes suddenly snapping under the broken spectacles, an eager, thoughtful, hungry look transforming his slipshod features.

What kind of a nut, Fred wondered, would sit idly by in the face of death, and then leap up at the prospect of—of—what was it he hoped to find, anyway? Fred hadn't cared much when they'd started out from Marsol.

He'd come along hoping to find new adventure, but he hadn't thought it would be like this.

Fred was recently of Earth. He'd come to Mars because he was bored with money, bored with security, bored with dollars and uncles and sea-going yachts. Mars was still a frontier. Marsol, the larger of two Earth's outposts, was an odd little city of domes and strange men. Miners, digging for the strangely abundant pitchblende in the cliffs, scientists, mapping, cataloguing, prying . . . and a few close-mouthed ones like Jeff who just liked the bleak cliffs and the desert and lived there for the hell of it. Fred couldn't figure them out.

"No—no," the Professor was saying, pulling at his chin. "Why shouldn't there be a *natural* lodestone deposit under the sand? We've seen nothing to indicate anything else."

The old boy was getting cautious now, Fred thought, but he couldn't hide the gleam in his eye. They called him the "Professor" back in Marsol, though no one seemed to know if he'd ever rightfully held such a title. He was just a near-sighted old man who knew more about ancient Martian civilizations than he

knew about Earth. He'd been the first and only Earthman to understand those time-worn symbols carved in the rock of the basalt mountains—those ancient Martian writings that were the only sign of a lost civilization. There were no ruined cities, no tombs—only those mysterious symbols carved deep in many an ancient rocky wall.

The Professor had read something in them that he wouldn't tell anyone. Not even the Institute or Foundation back on Earth that was still waiting patiently for a report from him. For years he'd been trying to get a rocket plane, to get someone to take him far out over the sand ocean.

And then Fred Wells had come from Earth and listened. His imagination fired by the old man's enthusiasm, he'd bought the plane. Money was nothing. But now that they were out here, mired in an incredible sea of dry quicksand, Fred was beginning to wonder what it was all about.

"You're right, Jeff," the professor suddenly said, breaking Fred's train of thought. "There is something funny going on out there. Ever see that many 'weeds all in one place?"

Jeff whistled. Fred looked out through the cracked port and saw—movement out on the sand. The cracked glass distorted vision but he could make out large shadowy shapes, stirring aimlessly like wind-blown things.

"What in—" Fred started to ask.

"'Weeds,'" explained Jeff. "Most prominent form of Martian fauna. If you're lucky, you see about one every year. They just let the wind blow them all over the desert—can't stop moving."

"We must be lucky then," Fred said drily. "If there's one out there there's a hundred."

"That's quite a crowd," agreed the Professor. "Mars hasn't been very prolific as far as life's concerned. The 'weeds and the sandburners and a few lichens up in



the rocks are about all you'd find. But come on, let's take a look outside!"

Jeff was breaking out the Mars-suits, garments of heat-retaining insulux that left not a portion of the body uncovered. Pressure tank and oxy-cone to furnish breathable air completed the ensemble.

Air soughed past the rubber-lined door as Jeff pulled it open. Outside were the sand and the sky—and the 'weeds.

Fred could imagine how an ordinary prairie tumbleweed, magnified six or seven diameters, might look a lot like these Martian creatures. Great, frail-looking entanglements of stick-like bones they were, rolling lightly on the smooth sand at the mercy of the wind. But they weren't plants. The thin bones were covered with skin and soft antler-down; and at the center of each ten-foot ball was a solid mass, a nucleus with two heavy-rimmed eyes, a thin beak of a nose, and a hopeless little mouth—all somehow resembling a tadpole with a human face.

"Damned if they don't look like my great-uncle," Fred breathed. "Those eyes give me the creeps."

"Those are the 'weeds," explained the Professor, his voice sounding hollow and far-off. "Semi-intelligent—they even have a language of sorts. Harmless, though; and what's better, they eat the sandburners."

Fred was about to ask what the burners were when one of the 'weeds suddenly rolled toward them. It moved by a yielding motion of the jointed members. A stray gust of wind caught it, threw it against a wing of the plane. There was a rattle like the breaking of twigs. The thing let out a plaintive high-pitched squeal and rolled on.

"Odd," the Professor commented.

JEFF nodded. Suddenly he pointed, on past the 'weeds, out toward the desert.

"Look there, a couple of hundred feet. See anything?"

The Professor blinked and squinted through the empty rims he still had on under the insulux visor, but shook his head. But Fred followed Jeff's gaze and thought he could see something. The 'weeds hid it from view most of the time, but there was something out there in the sand, glinting in the rays of the tiny sun.

"It's Mars metal," muttered Jeff, his sharp desert-trained eyes distinguishing what the others couldn't see. "We've found a little of it out in the hills—just scraps. But this is a low dome of the stuff."

"That's it! That's it!" cried the Professor, still squinting, trying desperately to see.

Fred saw it now. He didn't know just what a metal dome in the middle of the Sand Ocean could signify, but it was something unknown to man, something guessed at only by the Professor.

The Professor had quit trying to see the dome. He was in the back of the cabin, pulling out what looked like sheets of aluminum. Sand skis. Fred remembered buying them and hoping he'd never have to use them. They were seven feet long and a foot wide, light and thin, curved up and pointed at the front.

"Watch out for the 'weeds," suggested Jeff. "You get tangled up in one of them and you're bogged down good."

The Professor only grunted. He had the skis on now and was reaching for the drum-tipped poles.

"Where?" he wanted to know.

Jeff pointed toward the dome, and the Professor was off. He was a weird sight, a thin man with an oxy-cone transforming his features, skiing furiously to keep afloat. The skis slid on the sand like butter on a skillet; and the wide, round drums on the ends of the poles seemed to help a lot. The Professor warded off a rolling 'weed with a swing of his pole and went on toward the dome.

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UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

(Continued from page 112)

"Why couldn't he use the sled?" asked Fred of Jeff.

"We're six hundred miles from Marsol," Jeff pointed out. "The batteries in the sled are good for three hundred. Wouldn't want to waste them, would you?"

"Then how in—how're we going to get back to the base?" Fred wondered.

Jeff moved his hands like a man skiing.

Fred understood. But there was one thing he'd have liked to ask: could a man ski three hundred miles without stopping?

OUT on the sand the Professor had pushed a hole in the circle of 'weeds and had reached the metal dome. He'd thrown off the skis and was pawing excitedly at the metal. Suddenly he rose, hopped to a different place, and scratched away again.

"He'd better be careful or he's likely to fall off," Fred commented.

"Maybe we ought to go look after him," agreed Jeff.

To strap on the skis was the work of a moment. All too soon it seemed to Fred they were outside, gliding across the sand.

The sheer vastness of this Martian desert hit Fred like a blow. The horizon alone was near, a smooth unbroken rim of sand; and it left the world a tiny island in boundless space. In the blue-black dome of sky the sharp flecks of starlight shone, though sunset was an hour off. The air was thin and cold.

Ahead of him Jeff was steering expertly toward the dome, dodging carefully through the stirring circle of 'weeds.

"Hey, wait for me!" cried Fred, and the words bounced off his oxy-cone. Jeff didn't hear them.

Damn vacuum, Fred muttered to himself and concentrated on his skiing. It was well that he did, for just then a 'weed bounced lightly off the sand and fell on

him. It seemed to have little weight, but it threw him off balance. He swung at it with one of his poles and saw his mistake when a ski dipped under sand. No two ways about it—he had to keep moving!

Fred planted his pole in the sand and wrenched at the ski. It came loose, reluctantly. Head low, he lunged ahead into the tangle of 'weeds. The brittle popping of stick-like bones and the high-pitched wailing of the creatures dinned in his ears. They were incredibly flimsy; yet they had an odd resilience, a tangling resistance that slowed him down. The skis felt dangerously sticky.

Yet he reached the dome, stumbled on it. Jeff dragged him to safety.

"Thanks," gasped Fred. "I thought for a minute I wasn't going to make it."

Jeff wore a puzzled frown.

"I don't know what's got into the things," he said. "They used to duck behind the horizon if you so much as looked at them, but now—"

"Maybe it's the dome," Fred suggested. "Maybe we're trespassing on something they consider—sacred!"

Jeff had no answer to that one.

CHAPTER THREE

"Open Sesame!"

THE dome was about four feet above sand at its highest point and about fifteen feet in diameter. It was made of metal of a copper color with a suggestion of yellow flecks in its grain, but it wasn't copper—at least not pure copper. Fred found that out when he tried to scratch it with one of his ski-buckles. It wouldn't scratch, not even faintly.

Fred turned to the Professor, who was squatting on all fours at the very top of the dome.

"What," he asked, "is this thing supposed to be?"

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UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

(Continued from page 114)

"Eh?" The Professor looked up, blinking.

"I want to know what it's all about," Fred began. "I think I deserve—"

"Oh, yes indeed," said the Professor.

He pointed to the metal surface immediately before him. Fred looked, and saw a tiny black thread of a crack outlining a circle about five feet in diameter.

"I've found the door," the Professor explained. "If you've got the key, I'd be glad to open it up and show you—if there was a keyhole."

Fred knelt down, as did Jeff, to follow the Professor's pointing finger. The thin crack went all the way around in a perfect circle, and it did seem to outline some kind of a door-plug in the metal. But there was no projecting handle, no keyhole, nothing which might be used to open it. And the metal itself was old. It had been buffed and polished by a sand-laden wind for aeons.

Fred remembered his Arabian Nights mythology.

"Open Sesame," he quoted. "Open—"

He swallowed the words. Suddenly he wished he could have plucked them back out of the thin air.

For that door to the ancient Martian crypt was moving. The crack was widening, becoming definite. With a faint grinding noise the tapered metal plug rose slowly from its socket, rose and left a dark opening leading into the interior. It came up on a column of metal like a hydraulic lift, stopped when it had risen about four feet.

"Shades of Ali Baba!" gasped Fred. "I only hope we don't run into the forty thieves."

"Nothing alive here," the Professor told him.

The words came from within the dome as the Professor poked his head into the opening.

"Then who opened it for us?" Fred wanted to know. "Don't tell me the magic words had anything to do with it!"

"Not the words, but maybe the thought! I suspect the thing was set to open on mental command. The writings say that when a mind strong enough shall come, 'the gate shall be opened'."

"You mean a sort of—thought-electric cell?" Fred marveled. "A mechanism set off by thought waves? But who—"

It was no use to continue; the Professor's lean form had disappeared down the hole.

FRED knelt down and peered into the hole. In the faint light of the compartment he could make out the Professor, groping eagerly about the walls of a little room about fifteen feet square and ten feet deep. In the center of the room was a squat, cylindrical machine from which the piston that held the door-plug projected.

The Professor was kneeling down before a low dais, on which rested a black object. Fred heard him grunt in surprise. Then the Professor stood up quickly, lifting the dark object above his head. Fred reached down and grasped it.

The thing was heavy, black, and irregular in shape. Fred nearly dropped it when he brought it out into the light.

It was a statue, or rather a bust, for it was cast in the likeness of a man's head and shoulders. The hard black face was finely molded but somehow alien. It was not of Earth. The brow was wide, the eyes far apart. The nose was Roman and the mouth was large, thin-lipped, and closed. The bust stood about a foot and a half high and was made of shiny black stuff that was more metallic than bakelite. It weighed about thirty pounds in Mars gravity—that would make it about ninety pounds on Earth.

From the shoulders of the bust projected two bright knobs, their luster un-

UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

tarnished by the ages. They seemed put there for a purpose, but Fred couldn't begin to guess what it was.

The Professor was writing a short novel in his notebook, reading the ancient Martian scripture like a book of A-B-C.

"Atomic power," he muttered. "I knew the Old Race had it, but they seem to have . . . " His voice died out.

"Seem to have what?" Fred prodded, but received no answer. He decided to try and emulate Jeff's tactic of quietly waiting.

But Jeff wasn't even interested. He was watching the 'weeds, peering off past them toward the horizon.

The 'weeds surrounded the dome in an impenetrable tangle now, but they never came nearer than thirty feet on any side. Their thin, piping squeals could be heard faintly through the cold air.

"They respect this dome all right," Fred said. "As long as we—"

"We've got to get the sled out of the plane," Jeff broke in. He nodded toward the west, where the sun was setting. "There's a sandblast coming up or I don't know the signs."

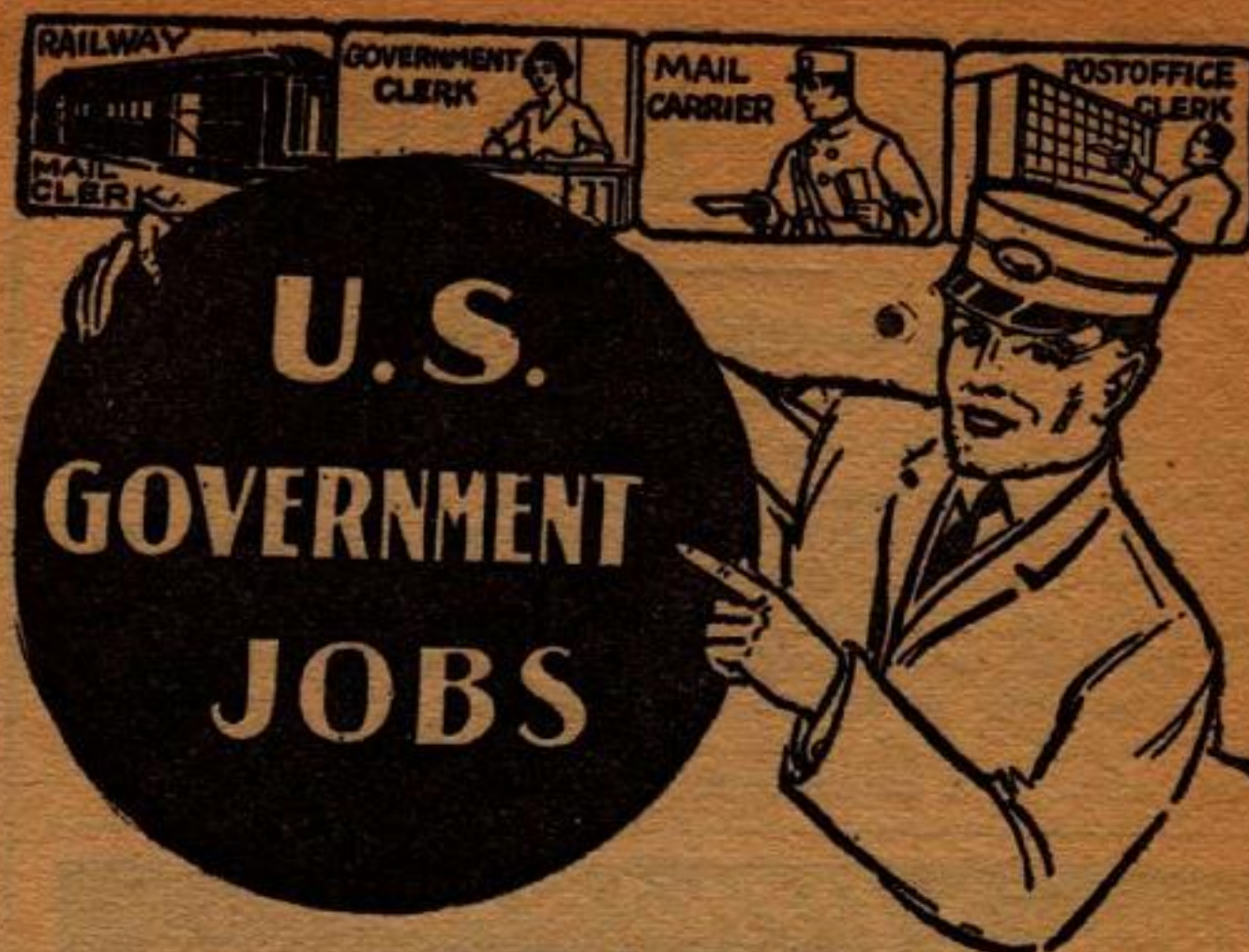
"Sandblast?"

"Storm. Got to get the sled and get out of here before it breaks. When the sand starts flying, you'll never see that plane again—or anything else if we're stuck on top of this dome."

Fred strained with his eyes, and thought he could make out a faint mistiness on the horizon. Night was coming there, racing across the sands. And with it, riding a mass of heavier, colder air, was the sand-storm.

"If we get the sled and get past those 'weeds," Jeff said, "we might be able to outrun the sandblast. It's been done. Sled's good for a hundred fifty per, and I don't think the wind can beat that."

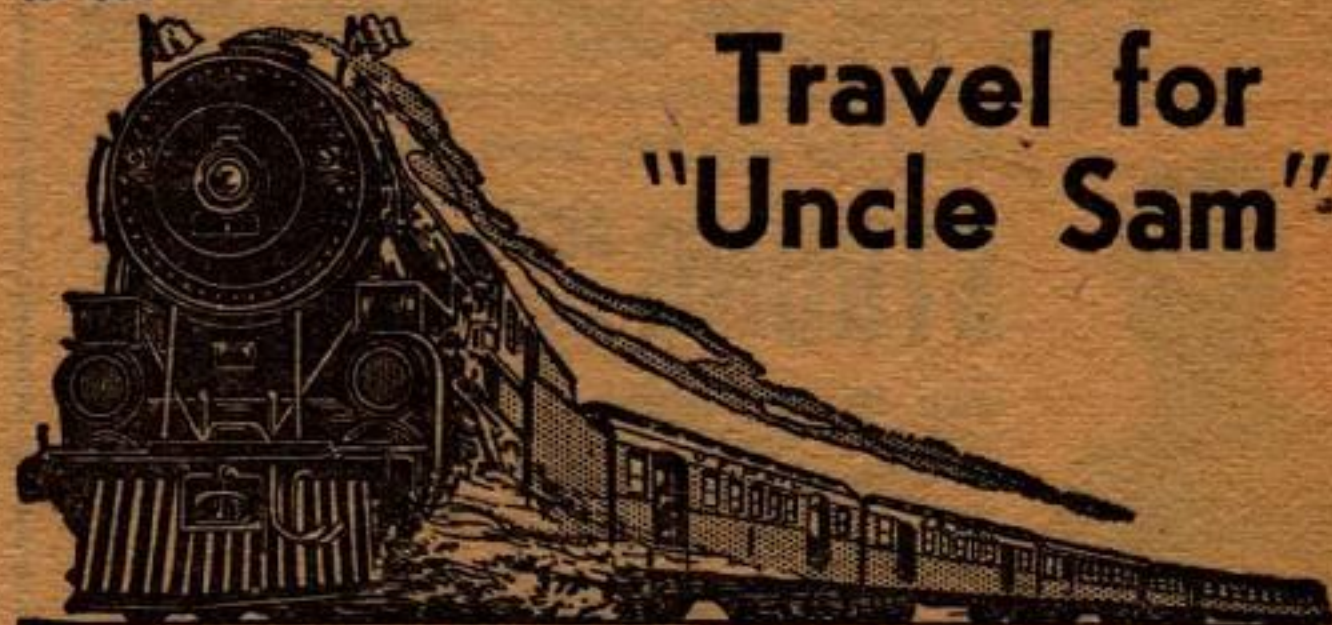
Fred remembered those batteries. Six hundred miles to solid land—and the sled



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was good for three hundred. Jeff wasn't mentioning that.

"Hey! Sandblast coming," Fred yelled, shaking the Professor's shoulder.

The Professor waved him away with a menacing gesture and went on writing.

"The sooner we start the better, I suppose," Fred sighed. "We'll pick up the Professor on the way back."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sandblast!

THE 'WEEDS were stirring restlessly in their sixty-foot circle as Fred and Jeff launched themselves out on the treacherous sand.

"They can't do you much harm," Jeff said. "But don't let them trip you. We don't know just how far the bottom is here."

"I won't try to find out," Fred assured him.

Jeff was ahead, maneuvering skillfully on the wide aluminum skis, dodging one 'weed after another. A ten-foot wall of woven sticks, studded with gargoyle eyes in little furry bodies, they closed in. One of them knocked Fred off balance. Little three-fingered hands clutched at him. He fought them off, smashing his fist through the creature. The thing's squeal hurt him, but there wasn't time for argument or understanding.

More of the creatures were moving toward him now, rolling ahead on the little hands that clawed at the sand and pulled them on. His skis were strangely heavy, dragging. He planted his poles in the sand and pushed, but they slid back suddenly in a cloud of dust even as two more of the 'weeds hit him.

Fred never knew how it happened, but the horizon tilted crazily, the sand flew in his face, and he was down in the sand! The skis stuck straight down, immobiliz-

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ing his feet. The 'weeds piped triumphantly, piling on him in layers.

"Damn!" cried Fred, swinging a last blow at the weird attackers.

His fist sank into the soft sand and stuck there. He tore it loose, only to find that his other hand had sunk deeper.

"Jeff!" screamed Fred. "Jeff, for God's sake get me out of this!"

But Jeff couldn't do anything. The 'weeds would trip him too, if they hadn't got him already.

Fred tore his hands loose again and wrenched himself to a sitting position. The skis were useless now. He groped for his foot under the sand, unstrapped the skis, let them slide into the depths.

He half-crawled, half-swam toward the plane, carrying bodily the 'weeds that still pressed him down. But when the sand came up to his waist his progress stopped. Out there, a hundred feet away, Jeff was standing in the doorway of the plane, yelling something. Good old Jeff—he'd made it! Nothing Jeff could do for him, though; the 'weeds were too thick.

When the sand reached his armpits, Fred reached up and took a death-grip on the framework of the nearest 'weed. Maybe the damn thing would hold him up—or he'd take it down with him! Or maybe the sand here was no deeper than it was by the plane. Fred concentrated on that thought, though he couldn't help thinking of how those seven-foot skis had gone lengthwise out of sight.

Then he felt the wind. He wasn't under sand after all. The red mist before his eyes was dust—dust backed by a fifty-mile gale. A force pulled on the 'weed he was holding, almost jerked it loose. The sand-blast was coming!

It was only a short, preliminary gust. When it died, the dust dropped swiftly in the thin air, leaving Fred's vision suddenly clear. *The 'weeds were gone.* Of the number that had been piled on top of



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him only one remained: the one he was holding. Its eyes stared owlishly at him, almost pleading.

Fred knew what had happened. These creatures were built for travel—and when the wind rose they couldn't help themselves!

Again the dust swirled up, swept by a giant broom from the west. The 'weed he was holding screamed as the wind tore at it. If he could hang on long enough—

There was a brittle pop and it vanished. Cursing, Fred threw the fragment of stick-like bone after it.

THE wind still blew, and Fred felt the pressure of the sand coming up past his oxy-cone. Then something loomed out of the dust before him—something dark and solid. It was Jeff, on skis! Jaw set, eyes squinting, Jeff was forging toward him, fighting every inch of the way. Fred ripped his arms loose from the sand again, waved them, shouted hoarsely into the wind. But he couldn't see any more—the sand was up over his visor.

From far away came Jeff's voice, "... rope ... tie it ..."

Fred felt it, looped around one of his arms. He groped for it blindly with both hands, tightened his fingers around it.

The rope suddenly tightened in Fred's grasp, almost pulled loose. The pull was steady but he didn't seem to move. God knew how far down he was!

Eventually the sand gave. Fred thanked his lucky asteroids for the light Mars gravity; on Earth Jeff could never have pulled him against the suction of the sand.

The wind was slacking again when he broke the surface. The plane was only a few yards off, tilted a little more but still above sand. In the doorway stood Jeff, his powerful legs braced, his body arched in effort. Foot by foot he pulled in the rope, dragging in Fred's Mars-suited body more easily now.

UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

Jeff helped him climb into the plane. Fred sank in one of the leather-cushioned seats, shaking a little from his narrow escape. "Thanks," he said simply.

Outside the wind howled jeeringly.

"One more trip like that, son," drawled Jeff, breathing heavily, "and you're a good Martian for certain."

"If the wind hadn't blown those 'weeds away—"

"You wouldn't be much worse off," Jeff finished for him. "Don't forget the sandblast."

Fred hadn't forgotten. The howling of the wind and rocking of the plane were good reminders.

With much heaving and tugging they got the heavy sled propped up in the doorway, ready for launching. Jeff threw a bundle of narrow cylinders on a rack in the streamlined prow.

"Oxygen tanks," he said. "Better change yours now."

Fred did so without comment. The sled was about eight feet long, with four seat pads and six-inch rails along the sides for holding on. It had a bullet-nosed windshield at the front, and tapered back to the driving mechanism with its electric motor, batteries, and sandwheel in back.

"We're going to outrun the sandblast," Jeff said. "It'll be traveling west, toward the daylight side. We'll run west along with it and ahead of it."

"But Marsol is to the south," Fred pointed out.

"You can't run cross-wind to a sandblast. Besides, we'd never reach Marsol."

"Then where—"

"Mountain range, somewhere west. There is one, but how far, I don't know—come on!"

The plane gave a sickening lurch, teetered a second on a wing-tip, and then settled back.

They shoved the sled out on the sand,

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Fred taking a seat at the front. Jeff threw in the power and the sled accelerated smoothly, the wheel throwing a fan of sand in back. The motor had to be a quick and positive starter—that was one reason for using electric motors on the sleds.

With a grating noise they grounded on the dome, scarcely visible now in the darkness. The Professor was huddled behind the raised piston of the door-plug. He saw the sled and pushed toward it, leaning into the wind.

"Can't close the door!" he was yelling. "Filling with sand . . . all covered with sand. . ."

"Get in!" cried Jeff.

Somehow they got the sled launched again. The wind pushed with them now, adding to their momentum. The sled hissed ahead like a meteor streak.

They were safe—for two or three hours.

CHAPTER FIVE

Atomic Power

THE professor was talking, almost to himself. Fred looked back at him.

"I tell you we've found the secret of atomic power," the Professor was saying.

"What's that?" cried Fred, startled, when the meaning of the words penetrated into his consciousness.

The Professor leaned forward.

"Listen!" he said. "The ancient Martians had atomic power. I knew that long before we found the dome. The writings on the cliffs told of a place, a tomb, where the greatest treasure of Mars was buried. We found the tomb—the dome! And inside was the secret, the heritage left by the Old Race of Mars to any thinking being who wished to claim it."

"The statue and the writing on the metal tablets. You mean—"

"The writings explain a lot of things and outline the working principle of the

UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

machine. The statue itself is a likeness of Tarum, the last great scientist of Mars. But inside it is a working model of an atomic power generator!"

"You mean to say that the old Martians set up the dome and even the writings on the cliffs, just to lead us to that?"

"Exactly," the Professor nodded. "Even the magnetic mountain that wrecked us is artificial—magnetized somehow to help us locate the dome on top of it."

"They overdid it," Fred said. "But why did they care? Why did they want us to find the dome?"

"They didn't care. All this was Tarum's own idea. You see, he himself had invented the atomic power machine and was justly very proud of it. He saw the end coming, and deemed it a pity that such a wonderful machine and its inventor should vanish simply because of—what happened. So he set up the dome and all the clues for finding it, so that even if visitors came a million years in the future, they'd still eventually run across it. It was purely personal pride, I suppose, that made him clothe his model in his own likeness."

"I've read only a part of Tarum's message," the Professor said, "but I think the machine involves some new way of speeding up neutrons—beyond anything they've been able to do with electrical fields back on Earth. The neutrons at high velocity collide with the nuclei of atoms, attach themselves, and beta rays—electrons—are given off."

"But Tarum's super-speeded neutrons step an element up into an isotope that throws off alpha particles as well—and fast. That means a complete disintegration of the element. Atomic power!"

"But you can't use those rays," Fred pointed out. "You'd have nothing but an artificial 'radium', only a lot more dangerous."

"Tarum's machine somehow changes them to electrical energy. This particular

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model will burn only element 79—gold, I think. But it's built to dish out millions of k.w. hours from a milligram of fuel."

"Some power," breathed Fred. "But what happened to the old Martians? With power as cheap as that they should have—"

"They did," the Professor cut in drily. "They proved Tarum's invention to be the most powerful and the most destructive thing in the universe. They projected it like a searchlight—a weapon."

"Weapon!" Fred gasped. "Why, that would start their artificial radio-activity in everything—in the air, the soil—"

"Mars went up in a blaze of glory. When it was over, the civilization of Mars was buried under the red sand, which itself is a product of the disintegration. You notice nothing like it occurs on Earth. It's light—lighter than water—that's why you sink in it. Some strange allotropic arrangement, no doubt."

THE GENTLE vibration of the sled as it tore along the now smooth sand was the only sound after that. The Professor didn't say anything. How long, Fred wondered vaguely, before the batteries would be exhausted?

Suddenly Fred was struck by an idea. Electricity! He swiveled his body to face the Professor.

"You say this—this model atomic machine will dish out electric current?"

"Of course. Tarum—"

"Damn Tarum," Fred yelled. "Have you got any gold?"

"Gold? You're thinking of using Tarum's machine to power the sled? It might work if we had gold. I haven't."

Recklessly Fred zipped open part of his Mars-suit and ran his hand through his pockets. Razor sharp, the wind was, but Fred covered up before any damage was done. He had the contents of his pockets in his hands . . . a silver cigarette case;

UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

an aluminum disc—return ticket to Earth! A few odds and ends, but no gold. Fred cursed the luck and tossed them all out in the wind. Why weren't gold trinkets in style? Even a bit of gold plate would have—

Suddenly he twisted around, pulled the Professor closer, and whooped.

"What's the idea saying you didn't have any gold?" Fred asked him.

"I haven't," snapped the Professor indignantly.

"Take off those broken specs," Fred laughed, though it was too important to be funny just then. "They aren't doing you any good anyway. But unless I'm mistaken, *there's enough gold plate on them to take us to Earth and back!*"

THE BASALT cliffs loomed high against the stars and the lights of Marsol beckoned brightly only a mile away.

But Fred was still thinking where they'd all be if the Professor had thrown away his broken spectacles!

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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

times around Mars with plenty to spare. It had nearly burned out the motor before the Professor had found out how to tone down the output.

But Fred had another thought, a disturbing one. Jeff and the Professor had been too long on Mars to worry about it, but Fred wanted to go back to a green Earth. He had a disquieting vision of the slim towers of New York crumbling into dust, melting into a red sand ocean. . . .

The hard black features of Tarum stared straight ahead, as if the soul of the long-dead scientist were still within them, driving the sled toward the base of the cliffs. The bright metal poles at the shoulders flashed electric blue now and then as something jarred Jeff's hasty connections.

Tarum, who had wished to make himself immortal, had done well to clothe that machine in his image, Fred reflected. But somehow he couldn't help wishing that they had never found it.

THE END

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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